



Arvind Thomas, *Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019). Print. xiv+267pp., \$75, ISBN 9781487502461 (clothbound).

R e v i e w

Piers Plowman and the Reinvention of Church Law in the Late Middle Ages, a monograph written by Arvind Thomas, is a welcome and important study of canon law and its relation to poetic texts. This work both builds upon previous studies and yet can shift the fundamental understanding of one of the most important English poems ever written. As an introduction to such a complex and important treatise, Thomas initially focuses on Walter de Brugge, an English clergyman and judge, who is mainly remembered as the first person known to have owned a copy of the celebrated poem *Piers Plowman*, based on his surviving will. This is a useful manner of introduction to the importance of this work and its relation to canon law to readers outside the discipline. An easy introduction to this poem is essential as William Langland's Middle English allegorical poem has been considered by many scholars to be among the greatest works of English literature during the Middle Ages, which would, in turn, go on to influence Chaucer.

This work appeals not only to historians of the canon law and scholars of literary studies, but also more broadly to those interested in the nature of the Catholic Church in the medieval world. Thomas's work, while grounded in *Plowman*, uses this specific example to convey a much more encompassing interpretation of the late Middle Ages and fundamental changes with Church law. Thomas masterfully utilises the influence of *Plowman* to outline the changes within canon law, yet in such a manner as to be appealing to the non-specialist legal historian. An impressive feat for any author.

The focus on the interrelation between poems and canon law is not new: however, it is the ability of Thomas to broach the gap between literariness and legality that has often eluded other scholars. Thomas seeks to reframe Langland's work to

demonstrate that *Piers Plowman* 'was composed with [...] canonistic treatises on penance in mind' (p. 5). Thomas interconnects the relationship between the 'physical production of another copy of the poem [and how it] included canonistic materials' (p. 5). Herein lies an element of the masterful nature of Thomas's work: he outlines how *Piers Plowman* moved from an ordinary poem to be considered and produced with canonistic materials. This, in turn, I believe, helped to cement *Piers Plowman* as one of the greatest Middle English poems.

A work such as this naturally has confines for which it excludes elements. *Piers Plowman* is a complex poem, which touches on several facets of law – beyond canon law into the realm of common and statutory law. Thomas's focus is on the canonistic elements, hence the religious overtones. While a great majority of medieval poetry is considered with a religious perspective even when dealing with secular matters, the secular elements with *Piers Plowman* can at times be underappreciated in favour of a more detailed treatment of the religious components. However, this is a minor note that should not deter others from this work, even though *Piers Plowman* has secular elements, in general, the work is overtly religious and Thomas treats this facet of the text in extreme detail. By focusing on an in-depth study of the religious characteristics rather than including the secular components, his work is more coherent and focused.

Much of Thomas's argument is centred on the categorical difference between version B and C, favouring them as they are 'useful as a basis for comparative analysis' (p. 9). While there are many strengths to this approach, it also leaves space for debate: one of the most prominent questions among scholars of *Piers Plowman* is if version B was revised by the author of version C, which Thomas aims to avoid. Traditionally, one would expect a study aimed at an analysis of the 'differences among the versions' (p. 7) to address this question. While Thomas does not seek to answer this question, a more detailed analysis of this theory might have been beneficial. Thomas states that 'It is my contention that *Piers Plowman*'s mobilization and modification of juridical properties not only engender a poetics informed by canonist thought but also express a vision of canon law alternative to and even critical of that offered by medieval jurists

and recorded by modern medievalists' (p. 9). He clearly identifies the first goal with his statement of the poetics informed by canonist thought, however, the more difficult component of this aim is whether this poem expresses an alternative version of canon law that conflicted with medieval jurists. It is within this more complex question, at least to this legal historian, that Thomas's work clearly becomes a seminal work. Thomas commands a masterful knowledge of legal source materials and brings that forth flawlessly - an impressive achievement. Thomas deals with several complex ecclesiastical jurists while relating them to key passages from the poem to reveal Langland's own immersion in canon law. This work provides a convincing analysis that Langland's text was viewed alongside the works of great jurists like Raymond of Peñafort, Henry of Susa, William Lyndwood, and Bernard of Pavia. This monograph deals with such fundamental legal questions as the difference between 'law' [*ius*] and 'rule' [*regula*], usury, and sin. In particular, the treatment of penance and pardon outlines renewed textual analysis, by focusing 'on its usage within the internal context of the poem' (p. 165) as opposed to looking to external historical events for inspiration. This approach builds upon the important recommendations of Jill Mann and requires specific mention for its impact on the debate regarding Langland's portrayal of penitent and confessor.

Thomas argues that the scenes presented in versions B and C not only illustrate (and dramatise) how the canon law operated. This book goes beyond this, showing that *Piers Plowman* as a poem was actively reproducing, reshaping, and extending the canonist concepts, which in turn impacted legal practice. In summary, Thomas's work is a thoroughly researched study of literature and law, engaging with complex ecclesiastical legal thought and its practical implications on the practice of law. He also effectively demonstrates why *Piers Plowman* came to be considered alongside great canonist material.

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